

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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Mission Statement - *The mission of the Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education Advisory Committee is to advise the Commissioner on the development and implementation of state and local policies and programs that are needed to deal effectively with the incidence of truancy and dropouts in state schools.*

Background and History

The Legislature in 1986 established the Office of Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education. During this time the Legislature also established a 15 member advisory committee defined as “individuals and public and private institutions which are involved or interested in the problem and its solution.” These individuals had to meet defined roles in these institutions. The Members of the Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education (TDAE) are appointed by the Commissioner of the Department of Education for a two year term. Those individuals who were appointed on January 30, 2021 are as follows: (Individual and Role) **Julie Smyth** served as the representative of the DOE.

1. **Heather Whitaker** - Representative of Teachers
2. **Dwayne Conway** - Representative of Elementary School Principals
3. **Paula Callan** - Representative of Secondary School Principals
4. **Mike Fallon** - Representative of Adult Education Teachers with experience in H.S. completion Education
5. **Christian Elkington** - Representative of Superintendents
6. **Heather Davis** - Representative of Administrators from Private Schools with Alternative Education programs
7. **Katie MacDonald** - Representative of Department of Health and Human Services
8. **Catherine Curry** - Representative of The Department of Corrections
9. **Debbie Barry** - Representative of The Department of Labor
10. **Susan Lieberman** - Representative of Local Positive Action Committee on Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education
11. **Sidney Morris** - Representative of the Business Community
12. **Rebecca Millett** - Individual who the Commissioner feels will contribute to the development of Effective Policies and Programs
13. **Lenny Holmes** - Individual who the Commissioner feels will contribute to the development of Effective Policies and Programs
14. **Dawn Matthews** - Individual who the Commissioner feels will contribute to the development of Effective Policies and Programs
15. **Katie Small** - Individual who the Commissioner feels will contribute to the development of Effective Policies and Programs

Summary of TDAE Committee Activity 2021-2022

The TDAE Committee began meeting shortly after the appointment of all members in January, 2021. Lenny Holmes accepted the role of Chair for the committee and Dawn Matthews agreed to serve as secretary. Monthly meetings were held throughout the year with the goal of being able to present a report in February/March to the joint Standing Committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over education.

The Committee began by having a brainstorming session about ideas surrounding how schools could reduce the rates of Truancy and Dropout and therefore inherently increase graduation rates. After a listing of ideas and clear explanations the committee conducted an “impact survey” where the ideas brought forward were scored on the members' beliefs of them having the most impact on these issues. After working through the results of the survey and further conversations the committee decided on the following 5 recommendations which will be presented later in this report. (The writers of each recommendation are noted in parenthesis)

1. Alternative ways to Graduation (Holmes, Davis)
2. Destigmatize the 5th Year Student (Holmes, Callan)
3. Keeping Maine’s Youth Connected Liaisons Statewide (Lieberman, Curry, Smyth)
4. Promotion of Community Schools (Davis, Millett, Smyth)
5. Addressing Chronic Absenteeism (Lieberman, Curry, Smyth)

Truancy and Graduation Data

Much of the data which relates to truancy, dropouts and graduation can be found on the Department of Education website, below are some recent trends as noted.

Chronic Absenteeism is the percentage of students who have missed more than 10% of their enrolled days and includes both excused and unexcused absences. Research shows that absences add up, whether excused or unexcused, and directly impact student engagement, learning and access to needed supports.

Chronic Absenteeism

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Statewide	16.56%	16.77%	18.27%	21.02%

Truancy is defined as the percentage of students who are required to attend school but have missed days. If they are in Grade 7 or above, they are considered truant if they have the equivalent of 10 full days of unexcused absences or 7 consecutive unexcused school days. In the student is in grade 6 or lower, it is the equivalent of 7 full days of unexcused absences or 5 consecutive unexcused school days

Truancy Rate

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Statewide	3.96%	4.14%	2.52%	9.00%

The **four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate** is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. From the beginning of 9th grade, students who are entering that grade for the first time form a cohort that is subsequently “adjusted” by adding any students who transfer into the cohort later during the 9th grade and the next three years and subtracting any students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die during that same period.

4 Year Adjusted Graduation Rate

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Statewide	86.54%	87.45%	87.40%	86.07%

Notable Trends

A notable trend worth following is the impact of COVID-19 on these educational success indicators. 2021 showed a significant increase in %’s of Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy. The 4 year adjusted graduation rate would be considered a lagging indicator, in that those increases in Absenteeism and Truancy will most likely manifest themselves in future graduation rates. The TDAE is planning to use future work to do a deeper data dive into these numbers to try and identify causes and preventative steps that can be beneficial to reducing Absenteeism and Truancy rates.

Alternative Education Update

The TDAE did not spend a lot of time this year looking at the state of Alternative Education in Maine. Lenny Holmes, Chair of the TDAE Committee is also the President

of the Alternative Education Association of Maine (AEA) and the following is a summary of key points in Alternative Education.

Alternative Education is an initiative within Maine Public Schools that have been established to serve students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting. Alternative Education students in Maine are typically those students who are failing academically, lack engagement in school and may have a higher probability of dropping out of school.

The setting of Alternative Education programs in Maine vary from district to district and include programs within the regular school or standalone programs. Staffing also varies in Maine from programs with Directors and multiple teachers to single teacher programs, however, most programs operate within the same school hours as other students in the district.

Common Elements in Maine

Alternative Education programs may operate as a:

- Program affiliated within one school district or regionalized with students from surrounding schools
- Schools vary greatly in staffing and # of Students served. *Most frequent is a team of 2-3 Teachers and 15-25 students.*

The setting of Alternative Education may be:

- School buildings
- Former school buildings
- Community Buildings

Components of Alternative Education may include:

- Community Service Learning (CSL)
- Close academic monitoring
- Small group learning (low student/teacher ratios)
- Parent/family involvement
- Life skills training
- Conflict resolution training
- Partnerships with community based organizations
- Work based learning opportunities
- Flexible scheduling for academic instruction
- Social Work Involvement
- Outdoors Education

- Attendance Interventions
- Relationship Building
- Team Building

Finally the AEA created an [Alternative Education Guide](#) to help current and future programs as they review and/or create programs. The National Alternative Education Association has also published a document of [Exemplary Practices and Quality Indicators](#) which Alternative Education programs can use to review their practices.

Recommendations from TDAE Committee

As previously mentioned the TDAE Committee in its Advisory role to the Commissioner of Education has 5 primary recommendations.

1. Alternative Ways to Graduation

The Committee's recommendation to alternative ways to graduation was broken out into 2 categories. The first will be a recommendation that SAU's should consider individual life circumstances for students and when appropriate adjust credit requirements to reflect a recognition that all students are not in an equitable situation. The second is the creation of programs and pathways for which students could choose to receive a High School Diploma.

Consideration of Life Circumstances

The Maine Department of Education in 2019 set the minimum standards for a High School Diploma as follows:

- 4 Years of English
- 2 Years of Social Studies/History (to include US History, American Government, Civics and personal finance)
- 2 Years of Science (to include 1 year of Lab Science)
- 2 Years of Math
- 1 Year of Visual/Performing Arts

However, there are few, if any, SAU's which do not have a higher requirement for their local requirements for students to receive a diploma. Almost all of these districts also have no means to adjust credit totals for students who have had a life experience or disruption to their education that directly impacted their ability to attend and/or be successful in school.

The DOE does have the ability to award students a High School Diploma who have met the aforementioned requirements and can show evidence of a defined Educational Disruption. ([MRS 20-A Chapter 211, Subchapter 5](#)) These special provisions are for students whose education is interrupted due to homelessness, foster care placement, youth development center placement, or unplanned hospitalization and for students who attend more than three different schools in a single year. While this could be a good option for students in need, it has been vastly underutilized over the years. Over the past decade only 21 students took advantage of this option. The reasons for this option not being used are varied but most certainly includes the lack of connection between qualifying students and the DOE. More local control of the diploma will most definitely result in those students who have experienced a disruption to their education exercising other options available to them.

The TDAE Committee recommends that SAU's examine how they might be able to address the issue of students who have been through a major life experience which has led to them not being able to graduate with their 4 year cohort. Actions SAU's might want to consider:

- Ensuring all Administration, Student Services personnel and Counselors have a plan in place to inform and educate students and parents about the options available to them in terms of applying for and earning a DOE HS Diploma.
- Creating their own Diploma pathway that takes into consideration these circumstances and allows students a pathway to graduation with their cohort at the local SAU. MSAD #6 (Bonny Eagle) approved a Differentiated Diploma program starting the school year of 2021-22. Students who have experienced a disruption to their learning caused by the same statutes as the DOE Diploma (including COVID-19) may now apply and if approved will receive a Bonny Eagle High School diploma. The advantages of local SAU's creating their own plan includes:
 - Local control of the diploma requirements by setting the credits they will adjust their diploma to
 - Reduction in dropout rates
 - Ability for students to graduate with their class and school
 - Personalized plan which could include supports and mentors

Alternative High School Programs

We strongly recommend that the Department of Education provide support for alternative pathways to high school graduation and look to community based organizations who are successfully providing alternative education at the high school level for students with complex needs.

Programs like [Take 2 YouthBuild](#), the [Penobscot Job Corps Center](#), and [LearningWorks YouthBuild](#) have served the state's teens and young adults for over 30 years with staffing, curriculum, and program models that local districts may replicate to meet the needs of students at risk of not making it to graduation day. These programs are not based within a local school district and have the autonomy to make decisions. The Committee recommends support for more of these programs throughout the state as they are now primarily located in more urban areas such as Portland and Bangor.

Many students seek out alternative programs because of the difficulties they face in adjusting to a traditional school setting. Some leave the schools because of anxiety or other mental health disorders, bullying, a lack of relationships with trusting adults, and more. Some face barriers outside the school setting including: substance use disorder, food insecurity, homelessness, teenage pregnancy and parenthood, corrections system involvement, and more. In addition, school counselors often refer seniors to these programs in the fall each year when it becomes clear the student will not be able to graduate from high school. Providing more opportunities for these students to obtain a high school diploma outside the realm of the local SAU's diploma requirements, will help these students remain connected to education and receive a diploma or equivalency.

2. Destigmatize the 5th Year Student

The Committee recognizes that the traditional 4 year graduation pathway is not the only route for all students. For many students a more realistic 5 year path might make more sense. However, there is a negative stigma associated with not graduating with the cohort they enter high school with. In informal conversations with students who are faced with needing an extra year many feel like they have failed by not graduating in 4 years, others choose to dropout or seek alternative methods to get their diploma (like adult education). The TDAE Committee recommends the DOE and High School develop plans on how to destigmatize students needing a 5th year. The following are two recommendations on how to do this.

To incentivize schools to do this our first recommendation is creating a way to positively recognize schools who convince students to come back for a 5th year. There are two

ways we would suggest doing this. One way would be to allow students who have registered for a 5th year to be removed from their current cohort and transferred to the following year's cohort. While we understand there are 4 year, 5 year and 6 year adjusted graduation rates, there is more scrutiny on the 4 year rate. By transferring these students to a new cohort, this will make clear there is no negative connotation with taking a 5th year pathway. A new label could be created as a "Continuing Education" student. If they do not graduate in the 5th year with the new cohort, this would be reflected in the following year's graduation rate.

Our second recommendation is a requirement that schools are required to meet with all students who after their 10th grade year are not on a "realistic" track to graduate and begin conversations about the possibility of developing a 5 year plan. Local SAU's can determine the criteria for defining when these meetings should take place but they should be required to have a written plan. Alternative Education programs have had great success with starting these discussions earlier in a student's pathway when it's clear they will have a hard time to graduate in 4 years. This has gone a long way towards destigmatizing the issue. It's not realistic to put together schedules that allow for no room for error with students who have established a pattern of not having a lot of success. By requiring schools to do this it engages both the student and others (teachers, counselors, administrators to start the conversation). The teams could create reference materials to guide these discussions and develop meaningful plans for students. The Course Guides prepared by all schools should include a 5 year pathway to graduation.

3. Keeping Maine's Youth Connected Liaisons Statewide

Presently, students who are highly mobile are falling through the cracks. To address this concern, it is our recommendation that a liaison position be created that will assist in creating seamless transitions and connections to educational, child welfare, and mental health programs/support for students. We are referencing this as "Keeping Maine's Youth Connected" liaison. Children and youth experiencing disruption can learn if they have continuity in their educational program. By recognizing the interconnectedness of the different State and community agencies, Keeping Maine's Youth Connected supports the State's most vulnerable population of students by providing cost effective and coordinated training and resources through a seamless accessible network.

The most effective transitions occur when there is a comprehensive network of school and community support in place for youth. Keeping Maine's Youth Connected Liaison Network can connect staff with the resources that will benefit youth and families, leading to better learning and health outcomes for students. The network of Liaisons represents

each regional State of Maine agency office, school administrative unit, juvenile correctional facility, in-patient psychiatric hospitals, and mental health crisis agencies. This multi-departmental approach addresses the increasing number of students who experienced disruptions in their educational programs due to homelessness, in-patient psychiatric placement, foster care placement, correctional placement, and/or high mobility.

A Keeping Maine's Youth Connected Liaison would support preschool and school-aged youth who experience educational disruption so that students can maintain educational stability, complete their educational program, access needed community support, and attain a high school diploma/graduation with the needed skills to pursue post-secondary opportunities. The role of the liaison would be to link the staff who know the youth to the resources and services that will support the student and family. This position is based on a previous Maine Children's Cabinet program that successfully supported students but was discontinued in 2012 due to shifts in staffing and Governor's priorities.

4. Promotion of Community Schools

Definition and Description of Community Schools

Maine statute defines a community school as "a public elementary or secondary school that:

- A. Participates in a community-based effort to coordinate and integrate educational, developmental, family, health, and other comprehensive services through community-based organizations and public and private partnerships; and
- B. Provides access to services . . . to students, families, and the community, such as access during the school year to services before school hours, after school hours, and during the weekend, as well as access to such services during the summer.

According to [the Coalition for Community Schools](#), "A community school is a public school. . . [that unites] educators, community partners, and families to provide all students with top-quality academics, enrichment, health and social services, and opportunities to learn and thrive. Through strategic relationships among families, educators and community partners, community schools embrace the whole child. Key opportunities found in every community school—powerful learning, integrated health and social supports, and authentic family and community engagement—help to develop students' cognitive, social, emotional, and civic capacities.

Community schools are student-centered: they listen to young people, what they need and aspire to, and incorporate their voices into curricula and decisions about the school. Partnership is the key to community schools; schools do not go it alone. They engage other stakeholders and strategically partner with families and community organizations to provide students with a full range of opportunities and supports”

Community Schools are a research based model with a demonstrated ability to impact students’ wellbeing, academic outcomes, and engagement with school.

How Community School Models Address Truancy, Dropout and Absenteeism Issues

[Title 20-A, Chapter 333: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS \(maine.gov\)](#)

Students may have various reasons for not attending school, but one main reason is lack of connection. A community schools model is based on connections - connections within and among the community - that foster relationships, services, and excellence. Whether the SAU chooses to hire a Community Coordinator or to provide stipends devoted to such community connections, attendance data is readily available to drive decision-making and mark successes and growth. This format has the potential to proactively address potential truancy and chronic absenteeism before it becomes an issue and to provide appropriate community support if need be.

Such a model of data-driven decision making on a regular basis can potentially occur without the community schools model, but the community schools framework around integrated school supports, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices that build a culture of professional learning, are pillars that would strengthen such an approach for a learning community.

Our Recommendations

We propose that the Maine Department of Education and Maine Legislature take the following actions to implement more Community Schools in the State of Maine to address issues of truancy, absenteeism, and communities with high dropout rates. We recommend that:

1. The Department of Education applies for available federal funding that may be utilized to support the work of community schools in our state. For example, the Full Service Community Schools program through the federal Office of Elementary and Secondary Education:

<https://oese.ed.gov/offices/office-of-discretionary-grants-support-services/school-choice-improvement-programs/full-service-community-schools-program-fscs/>

2. The Department of Education include sufficient funds for 18 designated community schools coordinators for FY21-22 and 28 coordinators for FY23-34.
3. The Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs and the State Legislature enact the proposed community school budgets.
4. The Department of Education support a Maine Community Schools Coalition that will offer statewide informational materials and technical assistance for district leaders regarding community schools

5. Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Student attendance and engagement are essential to student achievement and graduation. Too often, students, families, and school staff do not realize how quickly absences -excused or unexcused-can leave children and youth falling behind. Chronic absenteeism - missing 10 percent of the school year - or just 2 -3 days each month, predicts lower third grade reading proficiency, course failure in middle school, and more likely a stop in attendance in high school (Balfanz, 2012). A 2014 study by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research found that students who are chronically absent between preschool and second grade have significantly lower learning outcomes at the end of second grade than their counterparts who are not chronically absent in the early years.

As part of the 2018 Maine State Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan, Maine recognized the critical need to address chronic absenteeism. Presently one of Maine's school quality or student success indicators is chronic absenteeism. Currently, Maine has a statute on truancy which solely targets students who have unexcused absences. We highly recommend that statutory guidance be added to address the increasing number of Maine students who are chronically absent. By aligning with the Maine State ESSA plan and including a multi-tiered system of support, Maine will be better equipped to address attendance, truancy, and chronic absenteeism.

A tiered system should integrate both proactive and reactive strategies and include an attendance review team if the school has a chronic absentee rate of 15% or higher. The team may include school administrators, school counselors, social workers, school nurses, and staff. Recommended considerations include guidance from other state statutes on chronic absenteeism such as: a district chronic absenteeism rate of ten percent or higher shall establish an attendance review team for the school district, or a

school with a school chronic absenteeism rate of fifteen percent or higher shall establish an attendance review team at such school, or a district has more than one school with a school chronic absenteeism rate of fifteen per cent or higher shall establish an attendance review team for the school district or at each **such school**. The school teams will be responsible for reviewing all students chronically absent.

Future Work of TDAE Committee

Solicit More Diverse Input

The TDAE Committee is primarily made up of individuals whose characteristics and life experiences are similar to each other. There is little to no diversity amongst the Committee members. In order to better understand the needs of ALL those in our communities throughout Maine. We recognize the experiences of people of color, people in the LGBTQ community, refugees and immigrants, people living in poverty and homelessness and others have to be included in our work. While the committee's make up is part of state statute, we have the option to ask others to join us during work sessions. We will work with the DOE and others to identify and invite individuals from our underrepresented groups to join us for input to the work we are doing.

Needs Assessment Protective Factors

The TDAE Committee wants to better understand how early intervention strategies and primary prevention can impact Truancy, Drop Out, and youth accessing Adult Education. We are proposing that our future work will include a Needs Assessment. It is important that we begin to understand the larger picture. We need to understand the protective factors for academic achievement, the individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events (including Adverse Childhood Experiences) which may lead to Drop Out or Truancy.

We also need to understand the risk factors which may increase the likelihood of experiencing the effects of stressful life events (including Adverse Childhood Experiences) which may lead to Drop Out or Truancy. For example, children who experience abuse and neglect are at a higher risk of lower educational attainment. ([Source](#)) Also, educational attainment is protective against developing a spectrum of psychiatric disorders as an adult. ([Citation](#)) These are just two examples of what we've found in the research. In order to confidently propose early interventions and primary prevention efforts we need additional time to execute a thorough Needs Assessment.

Our Needs Assessment will be executed using the Strategic Prevention Framework created by the Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration. The Strategic Prevention Framework begins by assessing needs based on data and research and assessing the capacity of schools and communities to address this issue. Once we have a better understanding of the root causes, we can move forward with identifying what schools and communities are already doing in Maine and Nationwide and what's working for folks. Utilizing all of this information we will be able to make more detailed recommendations on implementation and how to evaluate that work.

Summary of Steps

- Complete a needs assessment using the [Strategic Prevention Framework](#)
- Review findings to make recommendations on specific primary prevention models or early intervention strategies.
- Share results of Needs Assessment

Alternative Education Report

The TDAE spent most of our energy in this report looking at different strategies and recommendations to help prevent students from dropping out of high school. Part of our future work will focus on the role of Alternative Education programs in this regard, including a more comprehensive look into what currently exists for Alternative Education programs in Maine. The success of these programs and the accessibility to programs for students in need. We would like to examine if there are equity issues for all students in Maine in regard to districts being able to provide adequate and effective Alternative Education and students having access to those programs.

Data Dive

The final item identified as in need of more work was a deeper understanding of what Data is actually telling us about the different areas of the State. While we were able to look at trends and statewide information, it is important to recognize that Maine has many different characteristics based on the location and economies of each district. By taking the time to look at all the data from throughout Maine we expect we will be able to offer recommendations which are designed to address the issues the students are facing from varying locations.

Conclusion

The TDAE Committee, made up of people from all over Maine and differing professions, certainly faced logistical challenges to completing the work and the task asked of us. Our focus was on coming to recommendations which were practical, sustainable and most importantly actionable. Considering the committee has been dormant for close to a decade and there was little guidance on protocols and the design of our work, the commitment shown from members during a time we are working through new conditions caused by the Covid 19 Pandemic is more than commendable. The recommendations found in this report are the result of many hours of volunteer work by a group of professionals dedicated to finding solutions for those Maine students who often do not have a voice to represent them. As Chair of the Committee, I have found this to be some of the most rewarding work of my career and strongly encourage those at the Department of Education and the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs Legislative members to take action on these recommendations presented to you here.

Lenny Holmes
Chairperson - TDAE Committee